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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the basic question: What are the factors that influence the academic experience of Mexican children, and, to what extent do these factors result in deficits in student learning and achievement? The study was conducted over the course of 5 weeks throughout Mexico in the regions of Juarez, Chihuahua, Michoacan, Mexico, D.F., Veracruz, Oaxaca, and Merida. Data were collected by means of personal observations, visitations, interviews, and lectures by and with sociologists, economists, social workers, public administrators, educators, curriculum specialists, and other knowledgeable professionals. Findings include: (1) Mexico has a high illiteracy rate, despite the free, compulsory nature of education in Mexico; (2) socioeconomic issues influence the availability and quality of education received; (3) cultural and social isolation of indigenous people is another component that significantly impacts the schooling of Mexican children; and (4) the economic and political position of teachers in Mexico significantly affect the schooling of children. (EH)

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Mexican Education: An Analysis.

Fulbright-Hays Summer Seminar
Mexico 1994

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MEXICAN EDUCATION: AN ANALYSIS

Tamara Slayton
Fulbright-Hays
Summer Seminar
Mexico 1994

Introduction

As a professional in the field of English language development, I have observed that there is not only cultural and ethnic diversity among the immigrant student population in Los Angeles, but there is educational diversity as well. That is, students come from a variety of educational experiences. Teaching to this diversity is challenging; in that, the differences are often extreme. Some of the students have had strong educational preparation in their native countries. These students are generally able to acquire basic interpersonal communicative skills and cognitive education and linguistic proficiency in English with relative facility. As such, they have demonstrated the ability to transition successfully into the mainstream English class.

On the other hand, many students appear to have had little or no prior academic experience in their native country. Additionally, there are gaps in the educational experience of those students exhibiting strong academic foundations. Within the poorly educated group of students there is still more diversity. The differences range from students who are only slightly deficient in basic native language skills to students who are pre-literate in their primary language and lack basic mathematical skills such as the recognition of numbers. The students in this group are generally able to acquire basic interpersonal communicative skills in English; however, they demonstrate difficulties in acquiring cognitive academic linguistic proficiency in English. As a result, the students not only experience problems in transitioning into the mainstream English class but suffer academic failure as well.

The school in which I teach, Monroe Middle School, is located in a suburb of Los Angeles called Inglewood. The school population, which reflects the ethnic and cultural diversity of the surrounding community, is comprised of African Americans, Anglo Americans and immigrant groups from Africa, Central and South America, Mexico and Tunga. Latinos make up 50 percent of the population of this school. Of this 50 percent the majority are immigrants or come from immigrant backgrounds. However, students of Mexican descent make up the core of the Latino population.

Observing the chronic difficulties and academic failure of large numbers of children from Mexican immigrant families stimulated me to research the factors that influence the schooling of Mexican children. As such, I applied for the Fulbright Summer Abroad Program entitled "Mexico and Its Children and the Year 2000". What follows is a synthesis of the social, economic and educational realities in Mexico that affect the learning experience of many Mexican immigrant children in my class as well as other classrooms in the United States.

Review of the Literature

Currently, there is a great deal of literature establishing the relationship between strong literacy skills in the first language to the acquisition of the literacy skills in the second language. However, James Cummins' Developmental Interdependence Hypothesis (Cummins, 1978) is at the center stage of the discussion. Cummins' theory suggests that second language proficiency achievement is dependent upon the competency level developed in the first language. That is,

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"The more developed the first language, the easier it would be to develop the second language" (Baker, 1978). On the other hand, when there is underdevelopment of the first language achieving bilingualism is difficult. Moreover, second language proficiency is dependent upon the competencies developed in the first language; in that, the learner transfers the use and knowledge of language skills from the first language to the second.

Richard-Amato further analyzes Cummins' basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) and cognitive academic linguistic proficiency (CALP); in that, she asserts that both BICS, surface level fluency, and CALP, cognitively demanding language skills, are both important to the second language learner, if he or she is going to achieve success in the academic environment. Furthermore, she claims that students need basic communication skills to interact in a variety of social and academic settings; however, the student must eventually develop the competencies in the second language that are related to abstract thinking and problem solving. The distinction between BICS and CALP, according to Baker (Baker, 1993), helps explain the academic failure of many language minority students. Many students only attain the basic communication skills in the second language. They never sufficiently develop the more cognitively demanding language needed to meet the academic curriculum. Moreover, the development of BICS and CALP in the second language are again directly related to the development of BICS and CALP in the first language. As the language learner would transfer the BICS and CALP skills from the first language to the second language.

Methodology

The basic question that is addressed by this study is: What are the factors that influence the academic experience of Mexican children, and, to what extent do these factors result in deficits in student learning and achievement.

The study was conducted over the course of five weeks throughout Mexico in the following regions: Juarez, Chihuahua, Michoacan, Mexico, D.F., Veracruz, Oaxaca and Merida.

Data was collected by means of personal observations, visitations, interviews and lectures by and with sociologists, economists, social workers, public administrators, educators, curriculum specialists and other knowledgeable professionals.

Findings

Though public education is free and compulsory in Mexico, there is a high illiteracy rate. In 1980, a government census claims that 6.5 million people over the age of 15 are illiterate; however, many believe that a realistic estimate of numbers of functionally illiterate individuals over the age of 10 to be about 15 million (Emery, 1984). Today, government statistics show that the national adult literacy rate is 84.7 percent (Arzac, 1992). However, experts warn that the national averages are covering up the signs of catastrophe (Street, 1994). In actuality, the trend reflects that 40 percent of the population is functionally illiterate. Forty percent of the students repeat their first year of school, while 10 percent of the students repeat other grades in

school (Street, 1994). Experts identify several underlying socioeconomic and sociopolitical issues that affect the literacy rates and the numbers of years students remain in school. What follows is an analysis of the aforementioned issues and how they relate to the crisis in Mexican education.

Socioeconomic Issues

The trend highlights the cause and effect relationship of social inequality in education in Mexico. More specifically, professionals identify the disparity between rural and urban areas as having the most significant impact in the education of its citizens.

Rural Mexicans live in small towns and villages. They rely on agricultural subsistence farming for survival. Much of the rural population is made up of indigenous people such as the Nahauatl, Tarahumara, Zapotec, etc. (Arzac, 1992). Many of the people still speak their native language.

The rural inhabitants comprise 27 percent of the Mexican population. The mean average of the years attending school is 4.4 years. The life expectancy is 53 years, while the average salary earned is between 50 and 100 U.S. dollars per month (Arzac, 1992). Moreover, in the poorest state in Mexico, Oaxaca, the monthly salary for a rural teacher in the mountain region of the Sierra Madre Del Sur is about 100 U.S. dollars (Arzac, 1992).

There are several factors that contribute to the drop-out rates of rural Mexicans. Mexicans understand the advantage of education; however, during economic difficulties children drop out of schools to work for short periods of time or permanently. When students return to class they often feel out of place because they are behind the other students and overage. They often leave school permanently after becoming disheartened (Maldonado, 1994).

Secondly, some rural areas have elementary schools that offer only three or four grades rather than all six grades. Additionally, some remote regions did not until recently have secondary schools at all (Arzac, 1992). Therefore, many students who might be able to attend school do not have access to education.

Furthermore, people wanting to escape the economically depressed rural regions migrate to urban and resort areas in Mexico, or the United States and Canada. This group is referred to as Mexicans in transition (Arzac, 1992). In Mexico they can earn from 300-400 U.S. dollars per month. Their average life expectancy is 69.5 years. Government statistics reflect average primary and secondary enrollment to be at 84 percent (Arzac, 1992).

Despite the improvement that the statistics show experts say that Mexicans in transition often exchange a hard rural life for a harder urban life. Because of the high unemployment in Mexican urban areas, the migrants are often at the bottom of the economic and educational strata. They often live in overcrowded structures without running water or electricity (Arzac, 1992).

What's more, trends indicate that Mexicans in transition suffer gaps in their learning when there is a back and forth migration pattern between their home village and the United States (Maldonado, 1994). Moreover, many of these students are functionally illiterate in both societies. In general, rural Mexicans and Mexicans in transition attain fewer years of schooling than urban Mexicans (Arzac, 1992).

In contrast, urban Mexicans living in larger cities like Mexico, D.F., Guadalajara, make up 63 percent of the country's population. They earn from 4,502 to 760 U.S. dollars per month. The average life expectancy is 73 years and the adult literacy rate is 84 percent (Arzac, 1992). Urban Mexicans generally attend parochial or private schools for some or all of their educational experience.

Sociocultural Issues

Trends indicate that the cultural and social isolation of indigenous people is another component that significantly impacts the schooling of Mexican children. The social distance between the native people and the mainstream Mexican culture exists for many reasons.

First of all, the indigenous people are separated from the dominant culture because of language. There are 54 distinctive ethnic groups speaking 56 different languages and dialects. A significant number of Mexican citizens do not speak Spanish. A great deal more speak some Spanish but are more fluent in their native language (Gonzalez, 1994).

The language and cultural barriers have had a negative impact in the schooling of indigenous students in the past. Until recently the purpose of education was to acculturate the Indians into Spanish society. The process of acculturation alienates the native people; in that, it implicitly implies that their culture is inferior to the cultural legacy of the Iberian Peninsula. This has resulted in some groups being extinguished as the use of their language and culture became subservient to the dominant culture (Emery, 1984).

Moreover, in schools many of the indigenous students experience academic failure. Experts agree that it is very hard for Indians to keep up with Mexicans because they are not learning in their own language. Additionally, many students could not make connections between what they learn in school to their own lives. A lot of students have had negative experiences in school and therefore drop out (Gonzalez, 1994).

Secondly, isolation results as indigenous communities elect not to integrate into the mainstream culture. Groups who have decided to maintain their traditional lifestyle and language often live on communal lands that are geographically isolated (Emery, 1984). Moreover, in an attempt to preserve their culture, many groups such as the Tarahumara are in the process of transforming their native oral language into a written language. The Mexican government has funded the development of native language materials as a part of its educational reform (Gonzalez, 1994).

In measuring the success of indigenous bilingual programs, researchers have found that the

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Indian students have better attitudes about their language and culture when they use indigenous language text. Additionally, students feel less alienated from the curriculum as they begin to learn their own history and geography. As a matter of fact, programs such as the Tarahumara model are so effective some Mestizo students are learning Tarahumara as well (Gonzalez, 1994).

Sociopolitical Issues

Trends indicate that the economic and political position of teachers in Mexico significantly affect the schooling of children. Teachers earn about 400 U.S. dollars per month. The majority of the teachers have to work two jobs to survive (Maldonado, 1994). As a result, there is not an emphasis on good teaching. All decisions related to teachers come from a centralized Mexican school system in Mexico City. The government places teachers in various regions. Generally, the newest and youngest teachers are usually sent to remote villages that do not even have electricity. However, in light of the corruption in the government, some teachers are able to arrange more favorable job placements (Maldonado, 1994).

Teachers are unionized, but the unions belong to the government. Teachers make up the largest union in the country, yet it is the weakest union. For the most part the union is a mechanism used to control the teachers. If teachers have trouble with the union, they will not only not be paid well, but they will not be able to get a good job (Maldonado, 1994). The union does not allow the teachers to strike. Some teachers have left the government union to form their own union. What's more, one way the union controls the teachers is by confronting the separate unions that they form. Furthermore, teachers are controlled; in that, they must pay rewards to the closest PRI union head (Maldonado, 1994).

School curriculae and textbooks are disbursed from the centralized government. Nevertheless, schools receive no money from the government for their operational costs. Additional revenue must be obtained from the parents or from fund raisers such as candy drives (Maldonado, 1994). The principals continually ask for supplies, but the government never sends them. An effective principal must in fact be a good politician in order to work with the government and the communities to get what is needed for the operation of the school. For example, one principal had obtained cement and parental labor to complete his school building, though he was still trying to figure out a way to acquire gravel and sand so the construction could be done (Maldonado, 1994).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Given Mexico's present social, economic and political realities, many view the future as bleak. More significantly, the trend suggests that the social unrest that has manifested in Chiapas is a warning sign that the government must follow through with economic, educational and political reform. Moreover, experts agree that the stability of the country and the success of NAFTA depends on the aforementioned reforms (Maldonado and Street). The United States must actively persuade Mexico to aggressively pursue these reforms; in that, Mexican social problems have become U.S. problems.

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The schools are the institutions that are severely burdened with these problems since they are legally required to make the English curriculae accessible to students who have basal to null literacy skills in their primary language. Again, this is extremely difficult given what the literature states about the relationship between literacy skills in the first language to the acquisition of literacy skills in the second language.

More significantly, the United States must do two things if it wants Mexico to reform. First of all, the U.S. must aid Mexico in these reforms. The majority of the aid should be in the form of advice, educational training and educational partnerships. Secondly, the U.S. must insure that NAFTA does not become another mechanism for U.S. big business to obtain cheap labor. NAFTA must be as economically viable for Mexico as it will be for the United States.

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